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SUBJECT: MOVING THE VATICAN ON BIOTECHNOLOGY: EMBASSY
CONFERENCE EMPHASIZES MORAL IMPERATIVE

Ref. 03 Rome 5205

Summary

¶1. (U) To build support within the Holy See and overcome opposition within the Catholic Church, Embassy brought together scientists, ethicists, and developing nation farmers to address a one-day conference on the moral imperative of using biotechnology to feed the world's hungry. Scientists from the United States and Italy presented the facts about GMOs, their applications and their benefits, debunking myths perpetrated by anti-biotech activists. The FDA's Acting Commissioner Lester Crawford addressed biotech food safety concerns, while a prominent bioethicist and moral theologian explained the Catholic doctrinal position on the use of technology for the common good of mankind. Farmers from the Philippines and South Africa extolled the economic, social and health benefits they personally had experienced using GM seeds. Church-based anti-GMO activists who attended the conference left unconverted, but with many of their arguments undercut by the weight of scientific evidence and the compelling testimony of developing country farmers. Media coverage of the event was extensive in Italy and internationally. Post appreciates the support and assistance provided for the conference from EB, HHS, the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan and FODAG Rome. End summary.

Moral Imperative to Feed the Hungry

2.(U) Ambassador Nicholson opened the September 24 Conference, "Feeding the Hungry, The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology," by observing that the suffering of so many in today's world of plenty was an affront to human dignity that presented a clear moral challenge. To meet this challenge the world needed to take advantage of biotechnology's tremendous potential. Criticizing Catholic activists who asserted during Zambia's food crisis in 2002 that it would be better to let people starve than allow them to eat biotech food, the Ambassador urged the Holy See to use its moral voice on food safety and the potential of biotechnology by issuing a stronger statement on the issue. The Ambassador concluded that the worst form of cultural imperialism was to deny others opportunities to take advantage of new technologies to enhance the human condition. The Ambassador also cited Pope John Paul II, who has stated that the correct application of technology could be a "precious instrument" in resolving the problems of hunger and disease.

Dimensions of Hunger: How Biotech Can Help

¶3. (U) Tuskegee University Professor C.S. Prakash, whose research has quadrupled the nutritional content of the sweet potato, set the stage for the discussion by sketching the dimensions of the challenge facing the world in feeding our growing population. While acknowledging progress as a result of the Green Revolution, particularly in India and China, Prakash noted that 800 million people go to be hungry every night and that half of sub Saharan Africans are undernourished -- a figure that will increase to 70 percent by 2010. Only by increasing agricultural productivity, he emphasized, could food needs be met. And, one of the best tools to achieve this, was biotechnology, which could reduce losses from pests, develop greater resistance to drought and disease, reduce pesticide use, and enhance nutritional qualities of foods.

4.(SBU) To make the scientific case for biotechnology, Embassy highlighted two of the best scientific minds on biotechnology, Dr. Peter Raven, a member of the Pontifical Science Academy and Director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, and Dr. C.S. Prakash. Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy for Sciences, and the co-host of the conference highlighted scientific evidence on the safety of GMOs and reiterated the Holy See's call for agricultural technology to be shared with the developing world. At the same time, he asserted that intellectual property rights had to be applied in a way that permitted wider access to the benefits of scientific knowledge in the developing world. Sanchez refuted accusations from within the Catholic Church that the Pontifical Academy had been bought by American biotech interests, pointing out that his academy was specifically tasked by the Pope with the study and debate of scientific issues in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. The study and debate of GMOs, he insisted, was totally consistent with the Academy's mission. (Comment: Sanchez, a key Embassy ally in promoting a positive science-based assessment of GMOs from within the Holy See, received more than 100 e-mails from Catholics around the world complaining about the Academy's involvement in the conference. End Comment).

15. (U) Dr. Peter Raven launched the scientific assault with a series of broadsides at the specious arguments emanating from Church circles opposed to GMOs and biotechnology. He labeled as "escapist" and "absurd" the argument that food insecurity was essentially a distribution issue because there was enough food for all in the world. According to Raven, there is not enough food being produced, and modern technologies to boost yield are essential for peoples' survival. Raven also dismissed safety arguments against GMOS, noting that there is not one recorded case of harm or illness resulting from consumption of GMOs. He pointed out, for the benefit of the European purists intent on keeping the continent GMO free, that virtually all of the beer and cheese consumed around the world used biogenetically engineered materials.

16. (U) Turning his fire toward biodiversity, Raven argued that nothing is more destructive of biodiversity than widespread, low-yield, traditional methods of agriculture, and that it is highly misleading to romanticize them. Raven said the development of GM crops, with precisely determined characteristics that allow them to survive in the diverse places they are grown promises not only major increases in productivity but a greatly enhanced ability to preserve biodiversity. Raven successfully linked GMOs to decreased pesticide use and the consequent positive effects on human beings and the environment, noting that millions of birds and animals would live and the health of hundreds of thousands of people would be enhanced by a reduction in pesticide use made possible by biotechnology. If half the maize, oil seed rape, sugar beet and cotton raised in Europe were genetically modified to resist pests, there would be a reduction of more than 14 million kilograms of pesticide, 20 million liters of diesel, and the prevention of 73,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide going into the atmosphere, he said.

7.(U) Dr. C.S. Prakash reinforced Raven's arguments with concrete examples of current research and GMO use. GM success stories included higher yields, reduced use of pesticides, nutritional increases and greater product freshness. Prakash extolled the benefits of GM products that were resilient to environmental problems - drought, flooding, salt water, and pests -- which had great impact on food productivity worldwide. The future total elimination of natural toxins, particularly in potatoes, as a result of GM was another powerful example of how GMOs could contribute to food safety. To advocates of the health advantages of non-GM products, Prakash pointed out that GM foods are being developed with less bad fats,

allergens and sugars. Prakash urged that GM seeds and other agricultural technology be made affordable and accessible to farmers in developing nations. He said he advocates GMO use because it will bring sustainability, purchasing power and wealth. Prakash lamented that the promise of GMOs has not yet been fully realized because of a lack of funding, constraints imposed by national governments, poor public perception of GMO benefits, activist opposition and negative media portrayals. Prakash said negative media on GMOs had a direct impact on funding and research, limiting what should be a powerful instrument

for the developing world.

Real-Life Experience of Developing Country Farmers

8.(U) Farmers from South Africa and the Philippines provided first-hand testimony on the benefits of GMOs for the developing world. Clearly and simply they recounted their stories of transition from traditional crops to GMOs, and how their lives and those of their families and communities had been enhanced. Edwin Paraluman from the Philippines explained that population increases in his country demanded the use of biotechnology. His corn for animal feed was affected by the Asian corn worm, and spraying with toxic pesticides had previously been the only method to control the pest. The first planting of BT corn resulted in immediate yield increases, with his profits up 30 percent. As a result, he was able to buy a refrigerator and a motorcycle for his family. Paraluman said misinformation campaigns by anti-biotechnology activists in the Philippines impacted in GMO use. The campaigns were based on ignorance and prejudices among the general population, he said, including the rumor that a person would become homosexual through contact with GM products. Despite this, the use of GM seed by farmers was spreading as they saw first hand the economic and health benefits of using the product.

9.(U) South African farmer Sabina Khoza said using BT maize had resulted not only in increased income but more free time due to decreased weeding and spraying. She had also been able to use her profits to diversify her crops. GMOs had also reduced local unemployment in her village as new workers were hired to bring in an increased harvest and manage a diversified production. Khoza lauded the cooperation in South Africa between officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, educational institutes and farmers through which theory and practice met to ensure sound and safe procedures for the introduction of GM seed use. Khoza said some 75 percent of the maize now used in her area was GM, with 25 percent of the crop coming from traditional maize so that farmers in South Africa could still choose what they wanted to grow. For Khoza and her farming colleagues, most of them women, GM maize meant greater safety because of less handling of hazardous chemicals. She said health was a major issue in South Africa, especially for women farmers who were responsible for the care of their families. From her own experience, Khoza said GM seed produced a high quality product, and its use was wiping out pests and disease. She acknowledged concern about the cost of GM seed, but added that the investment thus far had proven worthwhile. She also expressed concern about the potential impact that the use of GM seeds could have on international trade with countries that still banned GMOs, but said she was more concerned with food security issues for her local community. Khoza closed by saying public awareness would be the key factor in whether or not GMOs are more widely accepted.

10.(U) Dr. Carl Pray, from Rutgers University's Department of Agricultural Food and Resource Economics, who has done extensive research on the impact of biotechnology on farmers in developing countries, insisted that anti-GMO rhetoric was way ahead of the evidence. Pray presented his study of BT cotton use in China, where it makes up 60 percent of the national harvest. China's farmers chose BT

cotton because it makes economic sense, he explained. They use fewer pesticides - from 60 kilos per hectare to eleven -- and reduce spraying from twenty times per year to five. Although yield increased a modest 8 percent, costs were down due to reduced labor and pesticide costs, thus increasing profit. Pray said Chinese farmers who had suffered nausea and vomiting after frequent pesticide spraying also appreciated benefits to their health of using cotton. On the question of "who benefits" from GMO use, Pray said China's farmers garnered 80 to 85 percent of the benefit while consumers received none due to government price controls. Seed companies received a small benefit from GM seed sales. Pesticide producers were the big losers.

The Theological Case for Biotechnology

11.(U) Respected bioethicist Father Gonzalo Miranda of the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum told conference delegates that it was not the church's role to be a scientific arbitrator -- that was for scientists. What the Church could offer, according to Miranda, was an ethical reflection on how man's capacity to discover should be used to intervene in creation. Noting that God gave man "power" over nature, he said that this power is supposed to be used

for the good for humankind - in particular to combat hunger and illness. While any intervention in nature had consequences, science had to determine and assess risks. The potential risks and benefits of biotechnology, therefore, should be ethically assessed on a case-by-case basis with no blanket condemnation or approval. In the framework of justice and solidarity, Miranda made clear that if GMOs represent a true opportunity in favor of development in poor countries, it "would be a moral duty of solidarity to support their diffusion." He pointedly added, "to block GMOs a priori because of purely ideological positions or hidden economic interests would be a grave injustice." To critics of the role of multinational companies, Miranda affirmed the Church's doctrine that profit and multinationals are not wrong or evil per se, but that both should be at the service of humankind. Miranda concluded that justice demands that the public be fully informed about new technologies and that the developing world share in development and research to be able to find their own solutions to hunger and disease.

Biotech Regulation: Ensuring Safety

12.(U) Acting FDA Commissioner Lester Crawford provided a detailed presentation of U.S. regulatory mechanisms for GM foods and other products, describing the extensive testing process biotech foods undergo to ensure food safety. To date bioengineered foods have proven to be no different from their conventional counterparts, he explained. Crawford said the FDA and other relevant government agencies have drawn on their regulatory experience to help build regulatory frameworks in other countries. He said workshops have been conducted in the Russian Federation, Mexico and for several South East Asian nations. Crawford expressed his appreciation to the Pontifical Academy for the Sciences and to the Vatican for their openness to GMOs and recognition of their potential to enhance the ability to feed a hungry world.

Debunking Biotech Myths

13.(U) Keying off an open discussion with all panelists, Italian biology professor from the University of Milan, Piero Morandini, carefully debunked some of the classic

myths and objections surrounding the use of GMOs. Responding to the charge that agricultural biotechnology was "against nature," Morandini said that science does not support the notion that natural things are inherently superior to man made ones. Such a position, according to Morandini, was essentially pagan where nature was considered a kind of goddess and environmentalism a form of religion in which man is the worst enemy of nature. Dr. Morandini said arguments suggesting wealthy nations have no need of GMOs to increase or improve production are nullified by the facts. Even Italy, where a majority of the population is opposed to GMOs, imports GM maize and soybeans for animal feed, as well as meat fed with GMO crops. Taking on the charge that GMO's would diminish biodiversity, Morandini pointed out that preserving biodiversity is important, but doesn't address the fact that countries using indigenous varieties suffer malnutrition and hunger. Since conventional crops and technologies have failed to provide food security, developing countries needed to be able to explore new crops that can end the cycle of bare subsistence. Morandini concluded that much of the confusion about biotechnology within Church circles is born of ignorance and fueled by ideology.

Media Coverage

14.(U) The Conference, the third in an Embassy series of public outreach events that have previously addressed terrorism and human trafficking, garnered extensive, generally positive media coverage in U.S.-and Italian Catholic and non-Catholic media. *Avenire*, a national Italian Catholic daily, headlined its in-depth article: "GMO: No Condemnation; Evaluate Case by Case." The article led with a quote from Fr. Miranda, underlining the often misrepresented and misunderstood position of the Vatican on GMOs, emphasizing that "the Church does not consider genetically modified organisms as 'intrinsically immoral.'" Coverage also included a pre-conference live interview with the Ambassador and Dr. Prakash on Vatican Radio, which boasts an international audience of tens of thousands of listeners in 40 languages, particularly on the

African continent. Vatican-watcher John Allen acknowledged Post's persistent efforts to engage the Vatican on the issue of biotechnology. Pre-conference Q and A session with the Ambassador in the internationally distributed Zenit News Service, Catholic News Service and the Voice of America, highlighted that "despite existing prejudice and concerns about biotechnology in many countries, Vatican officials believe genetic engineering is a modern science tool that should be explored to address hunger and malnutrition in the world."

Comment

15.(SBU) This conference, the fourth outreach event on biotechnology hosted by Post over the past two years, was targeted at keeping pressure on the Holy See to adopt a stronger public position toward biotechnology and to ensure its diffusion among bishops in the developing world whose voice often plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of whether a biotech food is safe to eat and moral to grow. It also sought to respond to the Holy See's own call at the conclusion of its November 2003 conference on biotechnology (reftel) for further study and debate on the merits. The fact that the Pontifical Science Academy was willing to co-sponsor a pro-biotech event with the United States was a major step forward, and reflects the growing recognition within the Holy See of biotechnology's potential. This openness was reinforced last week by Prime Minister equivalent Cardinal Angelo Sodano's positive reference to the benefits of technology at the recent UN Food Summit in New York. Biotech opponents, who had inundated the Pontifical Science Academy with angry e-mails

prior to the conference, offered only muted criticism at the Conference in the face of the powerful scientific and personal evidence presented at the conference.

16. (U) Embassy greatly appreciates the support for this conference provided by EB, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Acton Institute.

Nicholson

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